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The FrontLine Supervisor

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Q. I evaluate my employees every year. I believe I should have feedback from them about how I'm doing as a supervisor. Would it be a good idea to have them evaluate me?

A. There are many ways to learn how well you are doing as a supervisor, but being evaluated by employees is probably not the best way to go about it. Such an evaluation reverses your roles, and employees will consider how their evaluation might affect their job situation and thus may not be impartial. Although exchanging feedback with your employees is a good idea, practicing good communication skills throughout the year by talking with them about their needs is more effective. Good communication will make your relationship with each employee more meaningful and provide an opportunity for him or her to be honest about any concerns. If a pattern of feedback about your supervision style emerges from employees and you find it troubling, consider how the EAP can assist you in making the changes you desire.

Q. Sometimes employees have such unusual needs that I doubt the EAP can help them. I know there are many community resources, but some problems require such unusual solutions that resources probably don't exist, correct?

A. Employee assistance professionals are continually researching and finding services to meet a wide variety of employee and family needs. Some useful services are indeed unusual and hard to find, but once discovered become part of the EAP's base of knowledge for making referrals. Lack of funds cause many small agencies and obscure resources to rely strictly on word-of-mouth advertising; many of them are therefore virtually unknown to the general public. However, employee assistance professionals may be well aware of them. The rule of thumb is never to assume that a resource does not exist for a unique employee problem. This will keep you from hesitating to refer to the EAP when employees present unique personal problems as explanations for ongoing performance problems.

Q. After a supervisor referral, why do I need to know about an employee's attendance or follow through with the EA professional's recommendations? After all, my ability to supervise the employee is not impeded. I simply focus on job performance.

A. Although in most cases your ability to manage an employee is not impeded if a release is not signed, there are benefits to the supervisor and employee when a release is signed. Employees usually want the supervisor who referred them to know they have sought help. Notice that this has happened is best communicated by the EAP. Not only does this reduce employee anxiety, it also improves employee adherence to EAP recommendations. With verification by the EAP that help is being sought, the supervisor can better decide whether to accept any further delays in improved performance, how long this period will be, or if any accommodation will be given to temporary setbacks once improved

performance begins. Where the EAP plays a role in assisting employees with alcohol and drug problems, a signed release may be critical to properly managing the employee or complying with federal regulations that may govern certain types of referrals.

Q. My employee is an excellent performer, but I strongly encouraged her to call the EAP when she began to talk about her husband's personal problems. The employee said she would definitely go. Is this a supervisor referral or a self-referral?

A. The EAP will probably consider this a self-referral, particularly if the employee doesn't mention your role in her decision to contact the program. Obviously, no job performance problems exist, so follow-up by you or communication with the EAP is not indicated. You of course played a role in motivating the employee to contact the EAP, but a supervisor referral entails more. EAP theory bases supervisor referrals on job performance problems that can be documented and articulated; however, nothing prevents the supervisor from urging an employee to contact the EAP when he or she volunteers information about personal problems. If this same employee also had job performance problems, you could choose to make this a supervisor referral. In that case, you would base the referral on job performance, notify the EAP of your involvement, and anticipate limited communication with a signed release after the first appointment.

Q. I'm angry with my employee who has been having attendance problems again. He did great for a while after being referred to the EAP. I feel the need to take disciplinary action but am concerned about whether the EAP will support it.

A. A key principle of employee assistance programs, and one that has fueled their popularity among business organizations, is that they do not interfere with the administrative or disciplinary processes of the organization. That means that EA professionals do not offer opinions or guidance or otherwise attempt to influence an organization's plans for or against disciplinary action. The supervisor must not interpret from discussions held with the EAP that proposed actions have been approved or rejected. Sometimes supervisors seek such guidance or support from the EA professional; sometimes they are frustrated when they don't get it. The boundary would be easy to cross, given the EA professional's privileged role and expert knowledge. However, to do so would subject the EAP to loss of credibility among management and employees alike. This would eventually render it unable to serve the organization.